

Honoring California's Fallen

Senate Floor Statement

By U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein

March 27, 2003

Mr. President, I rise today to honor the 24 young American men who have died in the conflict in Iraq. I would like to pay particular tribute, however, to the six men from my home state of California, and to talk briefly about each of them.

To date, these young men account for one fourth of all the Americans that have made the ultimate sacrifice. At the same, nearly 120,000 men and women now stationed in the Middle East, many of them in harm's way, are either from California or were stationed there before being deployed.

It is often said that California receives too much from the federal government – too much of the appropriations pie. But when you consider our population is 35 million and you remember that, on average, Californians pay more in federal taxes than they receive in federal programs, this is simply not the case. And Californians are playing a very prominent role in liberating the Iraqi people from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein.

Of the six Californians that have died so far, two were not yet citizens, while one was a direct descendant of the second and sixth presidents of the United States.

Together, they embody the depth and breadth of America's armed forces – men and women from all walks of life, willing to give their lives to defend our freedoms.

The first four I would like to honor – Corporals Jorge Gonzalez, Randal Kent Rosaker, and Jorge Garibay, and Sergeant Michael Bitz – were killed on March 23rd, in heavy fighting outside the town of Nasiriya.

Two were fathers with infant children that they never met, a third a son who followed his father into the military.

Marine Corporal Jorge Gonzalez

20 year old Corporal Jorge Gonzalez was part of the 1st Battalion of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade. He grew up in Rialto, with his parents, Rosa and Mario, and five siblings. He was an avid soccer player, and a graduate of El Monte High School.

His last visit home was at Christmas. There, his younger sister Nancy, who was never affectionate with her brother, hugged and kissed him before he left. "I knew I had to do that," she said.

He also left behind his wife Jazty and their three week old baby boy, Alonso, who he never knew. He had hoped to retire from the Marines in a year and become a policeman.

Before leaving he told his anxious mother,: "Don't worry, mom. If I die a Marine, I'll die honored."

Marine Sergeant Michael E. Bitz

Marine Sargeant Michael Bitz, a part of the 2nd Assault Amphibious Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, was just 31 years old. He grew up in Port Hueneme.

He loved being a marine so much, he reenlisted last fall. He loved his wife Janina so much that they had just renewed their vows. When he left for the Gulf, they were expecting twins, Caleb and Taylor, who are now a month old. They also have a two-year-old son, Joshua, and a 7 year-old son, Christian, from an earlier marriage.

In his last phone call to his mother, Donna, Sargeant Bitz was able to tell her that he loved her – and in his last letter he said that he was her warrior. In classic Marine-style, she always called her "ma'am."

Marine Corporal Randal Kent Rosacker

Corporal Randal Kent Rosacker was also a member of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade. He was a rough-and-tumble athlete who loved the outdoors and ever since he was a boy he knew he wanted to follow his father, Rod, into the military.

Corporal Rosacker grew up in San Diego, the son of Navy man. He played football, baseball and wrestled for the Serra High School Conquistadors. His wrestling coach, Steve Stone, recalled when Randal broke his hand senior year, just before an important game.

"Well, we heard some thudding on the wall in the lockerroom," he said. "We walk in, and Randy had broken off his cast. He said: 'Coach, tape it up. I'm ready to go.'"

His former baseball coach, Chris Herrin, said that Rosacker's teammates could always count on him. "He was the kind of guy who you would want fighting for your country," Herrin said.

His grandmother, Patricia, said her grandson died doing something he loved –

serving America. "He believed in what he was doing," she said. He was just 21 years old.

Marine Corporal Jorge Garibay

Born in Jalisco, Mexico, Corporal Jorge Garibay played football at Newport Harbor High School, in Costa Mesa. He, too, was just 21 years old.

One of his teachers, Janis Toman, described him as a hard worker who frequently returned to the high school campus in full uniform, to encourage students to do their best.

Ms. Toman received a letter from Corporal Garibay just a few hours before learning of his death, as she packed him a care package. "He wrote of simple things that we take for granted but make soldiers happy," she said. "Things like moving from a small tent to a bigger one."

"I want to defend the country I plan to become a citizen of," he wrote to her. He also left a tape recording before his deployment for his beloved uncle Urbano, whom he regarded as a surrogate father.

In the tape he said: "I'm being called to represent and serve my country. I don't know if I'll return, and I want you to know that I love you and how much I appreciate the support and love you have given me over the years."

Marine Lance Corporal Jose Gutierrez

Lance Corporal Jose Gutierrez was the first American killed in combat. He was struck by enemy fire while fighting alongside fellow Marines near the southern Iraqi port city of Umm al Qasr. He was 22 years old.

Corporal Gutierrez arrived in the United States when he was a 16 year old orphan, having left poverty-stricken circumstances in Guatemala City and a country racked by a brutal civil war.

He traveled over 2,000 miles by foot, north through Mexico, in search of a better life here in the United States.

Like so many immigrants, his past was soon eclipsed by his new life as an American. He was taken in by the Mosquera family, of Lomita, California. Nora and Max Mosquera had begun helping immigrant foster children when their own children had grown.

"He joined the Marines to pay back a little of what he'd gotten from the U.S.," Max Mosquera said. "For him it was a question of honor."

A tall and quiet young man who enjoyed soccer and chess, Jose learned English quickly and had plans to study architecture.

“He was such a good kid,” remembered Robert Nobles, a physical education teacher at North High in Torrance, where Corporal Gutierrez graduated in 2000.

I have been told that news of his death has resonated throughout Guatemala. Every major newspaper, radio and TV station carried his story. He has been portrayed as a brave and selfless young man – which he most certainly was.

Navy Lieutenant Thomas Mullen Adams

Navy Lieutenant Thomas Mullen Adams grew up in comfort, in the suburb of La Mesa, as a member of a family that traces its roots directly to John Adams, one of America’s most important Founding Fathers.

He graduated from Grossmont High School in 1993 and the United States Naval Academy in 1997.

He received flight training in Pensacola, Florida, and inherited his love of flying from his father, John, an architect who helped design the Aerospace Museum in San Diego.

Promoted to lieutenant in the year 2000, Adams won two National Defense Service Medals, three Sea Service Deployment Ribbons and other awards.

“He’s one of these amazingly clean-cut, all-American kids, his aunt, Elizabeth Hansen, told the *San Diego Union Tribune* newspaper. “He’s the kind of kid that if you had a very special daughter, you would hope that she would snag him. He was just amazingly bright, funny and kind.”

In October of 2002, Lieutenant Adams was assigned as an exchange officer with the British Royal Navy’s 849 Squadron, now on the aircraft carrier Ark Royal.

An avid soccer fan who had volunteered to go to Japan with the carrier Kitty Hawk in time for the World Cup finals last summer, he joined a local team near his base in Helston, England.

Lieutenant’s Adams’ family said that he particularly enjoyed his time with the Royal Navy for two reasons: every ship had a pub on board, and he was allowed a weekly 20-minute phone call home. He died with the Royal Navy, when the helicopter he was flying in collided with another helicopter over the Persian Gulf. He was just 27 years old.

Conclusion

We all wish for a quick resolution to this war, to limit casualties, military and civilian, American, allied and Iraqi.

We wish that American and coalition forces will be able to liberate the people of Iraq soon, and that our men and women will be able to return home to their families.

Until then, however, they remain in our thoughts and our prayers, along with those that have already fallen.

All Americans owe an enormous – an almost incalculable – debt to these young men who were willing to sacrifice their own futures for the future of this country they so clearly loved, so that we, as a people, might be safe and free. Their sacrifices must never be forgotten.